

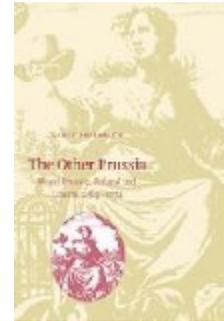
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Re-imagining Prussian History

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For most H-German subscribers, the words “Prussia” and “Prussian” likely conjure up images of the Hohenzollern monarchy and East Elbian Junkers, prototypical images of German history. The standard narrative of Prussian history proceeds along a trajectory from the Teutonic Knights and the introduction of German influence in the East, to the emergence of a strong militaristic and bureaucratic state under the Hohenzollern dynasty, to the Prussian-led unification of German in 1871 and beyond. Prussian meant German, an equation that nationalist politicians and historians in Wilhelmine Germany so often repeated.[1] “Polish Prussia,” as Royal Prussia came to be called in the eighteenth century, seems to us, therefore, an oxymoron. However, as Karin Friedrich demonstrates in her excellent, thoughtful and thoroughly researched monograph, *The Other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569-1772*, the political elites of Royal or Polish Prussia, the “other Prussia,” a province of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, constructed a multi-layered identity that entailed both the defense of local Prussian traditions and loyalty to the constitutional structure of the Polish-Lithuanian state.

As Friedrich ably describes in her introduction, the history of Prussia has long been a battlefield of national history. On the one hand, German historians have sought to prove the essential and historic “Germanness” of the province. As Friedrich notes, “the Germanisation of

Prussian history is one of the most strikingly successful examples of the survival of a historical myth to the present” (p. 3). Both in Germany (in its various borders) and outside Germany (with the exception of Poland), the history of Prussia has told the story of a “German” country and the Hohenzollern dynasty, with little or no reference to the significance of the Polish aspect for Prussian history. On the other hand, Polish historians, for their part, have also nationalized the history of Prussia, downplaying the significance of non-Polish and non-Catholic groups in the multi-national Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania. Polish histories of Royal Prussia have emphasized the loyalty of Prussian elites to the Commonwealth and then their betrayal of the Commonwealth during the era of the partitions, as well as the continuous presence of an ethnic Polish population and of Polish culture and language. The Prussians themselves, therefore, often disappeared into an ideological haze, a tendency exacerbated in German- and English-language historiography by historians’ ignorance of the Polish language and, as a result, of Polish-language sources.

Friedrich’s contribution to the literature exposes the politicization of Prussian history and the many myths surrounding it. It also (re-)opens the field of Prussian history to further investigation. Friedrich analyzes the construction of a Prussian national identity in the province of Royal Prussia and its major cities of Danzig (Gdansk), Thorn (Torun), and Elbing (Elblag) from the Union of Lublin in 1569 to the first partition of Poland-Lithuania in 1772. Friedrich argues that “Prussians were neither

Germans nor Poles” (p. 217). Rather, Royal Prussian nobles and burghers united to develop a notion of Prussian identity that centered on the defense of Prussian liberty in the context of the constitutional Polish-Lithuanian state: “the Prussian nation defined itself politically as a community of citizens who embraced the constitutional agenda of the multinational [Polish-Lithuanian] Commonwealth” (p. 217).

As Friedrich shows, both Royal and Ducal Prussia revolted against the Teutonic Knights in the mid-fifteenth century because of the Order’s increasingly arbitrary rule and its monopoly over trade and governmental offices. After 1466, there were two Prussias. The eastern territories, Ducal Prussia, remained under the administration of the Teutonic Knights and owed an oath of allegiance to the Polish crown. When the last Grand Master of the Order, Albrecht of Hohenzollern, converted to Lutheranism in 1525 and secularized the province, he declared himself the Duke of Prussia, a vassal of the Polish crown until Frederick William, the Elector of Brandenburg, established full sovereignty over the duchy in 1657. The western territories of Prussia, Royal Prussia, were incorporated into the Polish crown, on the basis of the Incorporation Act of 1454, which confirmed all the privileges and rights that the Prussian estates had previously enjoyed. The Polish king granted Royal Prussia certain powers of self-government, and the Prussian nobility shared power with the urban burghers. In the Union of Lublin in 1569, Royal Prussia retained a bicameral provincial diet, and urban burghers remained a significant part of the political elite, considerably more so than elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

On the basis of a close analysis of the historical and political writings of leading Prussians, Friedrich convincingly demonstrates that Royal Prussian elites, both nobles and burghers, remained loyal to the Polish-Lithuanian mixed form of government, a constitutional structure that preserved Prussian liberties. The emergence of absolutist regimes around them—namely, the rise of Brandenburg-Prussia—only strengthened the loyalty of Prussian elites to the Commonwealth. Indeed, Royal Prussian identity was, in many ways, defined in opposition to Ducal Prussian identity. Just as they had revolted against the Teutonic Knights in order to preserve traditional Prussian liberties, so too did they construct a notion of Prussian identity within the Polish-Lithuanian state around the idea of liberty and in opposition to the centralizing tendencies of absolutism. Urban burghers played a decisive role in the construction of this Prussian identity, thus justifying Friedrich’s focus on Royal

Prussia’s three major cities.

Central to Friedrich’s thesis is her examination of history-writing and historical myth (in particular, chapters 4 and 9). Friedrich draws on recent studies in the history of nationalism to examine the imagining and invention of national identities in the era before nationalism.[2] Prussians formed a sense of Royal Prussian identity on the basis of an understanding of a shared history and a shared political culture: “History, applied as a political instrument, forged a community’s sense of the past by several means, including a collective name, a myth of origin and descent, a shared history and a specific political culture based on the freedom of its citizens, within a limited territory” (p. 76). Her innovative approach to the study of identity in the pre-national age enables Friedrich to examine a variety of early modern identities—local, regional, national, estate, confessional—and their roles in the creation of a Prussian identity.[3] As she argues, the primary characteristic of Prussian identity was the defense of liberty.

Friedrich argues that Prussians adapted the Polish myth of Sarmatianism or Sarmatism—the myth that Polish nobles were descended from the ancient tribe of Sarmatia—to Prussian circumstances. Prussian, and many Polish, historians included Prussians among the Sarmatians. That Prussian, German-speaking and Protestant, burghers, would have adopted Sarmatianism as their own may surprise many readers. Sarmatianism has generally been presented as an ideology of the Polish *szlachta* (nobility), which focused on noble origin and Catholic belief in offering a defense of the “golden liberties” of Polish nobles. Friedrich persuasively argues, however, that Sarmatian identity was a flexible concept. Prussian burghers latched onto the ideal of liberty so central to Sarmatianism and thus used the Sarmatian myth to defend their own liberties against both the Commonwealth and the encroachments of Brandenburg-Prussia. As Friedrich argues: “Historical mythology therefore became the powerful basis of a Prussian burgher vision of Sarmatian history and self-definition, often used to counter their exclusion from citizenship, which the majority of the Polish nobility interpreted against them. Anyone who would listen, particularly other nations represented in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, received this message: we are Sarmatian Prussians, not subjects but free men and citizens” (p. 95).

Friedrich’s thesis rests on her meticulous analysis of an impressive array of sources. Her analysis benefits from her thorough reading of German, Polish, and

Latin sources, including the writings of prominent Prussian historians and politicians as well as the records of the municipal governments of Royal Prussia's three major cities. Friedrich's mastery of Polish sources, in particular, enables her to avoid the pitfalls of much of the German- and English-language literature—namely, the over-reliance on German-language sources and secondary literature, a strategy that has often resulted in an over-emphasis on the German aspect of Royal Prussian history as well as of Prussian history in general.

Friedrich's analysis of Prussian identity is a significant contribution to Prussian, Polish, and German history as well as to the history of early modern identity-formation. The text is primarily directed towards historians of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and of early modern Prussia. Although Friedrich provides the necessary political and social context for her discussion of Prussian identity as well as a primer on the Polish-Lithuanian government in the form of a glossary, the text may be difficult for those readers unfamiliar with the structures of the Commonwealth and the myth of Sarmatianism. In particular, given the centrality of Sarmatianism for Friedrich's analysis, a more extensive discussion of the Sarmatian myth itself as well as how it functioned in Poland-Lithuania's noble democracy would make clearer both how the Prussians adapted it for themselves and the significance of that process of adaptation for Prussian and Polish history. Nonetheless, early modern historians of all stripes as well as modern German and Polish historians, particularly those working on questions of national identity, would benefit greatly from a close reading of Friedrich's analysis.

Friedrich's argument that a Prussian national identity, neither German nor Polish, emerged around the notion of liberty and a vision of civic society, an argument that upends conventional wisdom, should inspire other historians of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania to apply the same approach to other national groups within the state. Friedrich's own work is sure to enter the canon in short order.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Heinrich Treitschke's history of Prussia, *Origins of Prussianism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942, first published 1862).

[2]. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[3]. For an excellent study of the Reformation and the question of confession in Royal Prussia, see Michael G. Mueller, *Zweite Reformation und staedtische Autonomie im Koeniglichen Preussen: Danzig, Elbing und Thorn in der Epoche der Konfessionalisierung (1557-1660)* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1998).

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